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Pricey farewell for furry friends

Deciding if it's worth the cost

BY ELIZABETH LAZAROWITZ
 DAILY NEWS BUSINESS WRITER

When Rhona Levy lost her beloved pal in 2001, she spent more than \$2,500 to lay him to rest in a satin-lined casket following an intimate wake.

The Bronx office worker didn't invite friends to the ceremony, fearing they wouldn't understand - her departed loved one was her pet poodle, Snow.

"My dog was a family member, not just something I wanted to euthanize and dispose of," said Levy, of the Pelham Parkway section.

Her cats Putchke and Pumpkin have since joined Snow in the plot she bought at the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery in Westchester. All told, she has spent about \$9,000 in pet funeral services, including a second plot for future use by her current pets and a \$1,300 granite monument that bears the words, "Mommy will be home soon."

With the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association estimating spending on pet products at \$38.4 billion in 2006, it's no surprise owners are unwilling to scrimp when it comes to their pets' last rites.

Kathryn Lahn, manager of the Bide-A-Wee pet memorial parks on Long Island, said she saw one mourner hire a hearse to bring her departed pooch to the cemetery and another hire a bagpiper to play during his dog's trip to the grave site.

"The clients that we have are very pet-oriented people," she said.

For some, a pet's death can mean losing a relationship that is "unique, profound and irreplaceable," said Liz Margolies, a clinical social worker who runs a pet-loss support program at Animal General on the upper West Side. The



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Rhona Levy, 47, of the Bronx has three pets buried at one grave site in Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, and has already prepared a separate plot and headstone for two living pets - and herself.



Pumpkin



New York Daily News
Comics and Games

grief can be even more profound than losing a parent, she said. "Most adults are not living with their parents full time. A cat or dog is part of their daily life."

Online pet memorials and pet-loss support groups have sprung up all over the Internet. At RainbowsBridge.com, where a "residency" costs \$25 a year, there are memorials for some 2,500 New York-area pets. Owners can post a photo of their pet - and add virtual items like a can of tuna, a teddy bear or a dog biscuit. A memorial for one Brooklyn dog written by owner Jeanie Martino reads: "Nicky, you were my pal, confidante, protector, court jester and biggest fuzzy love."

Putchke



Snow

There is also a pet loss grief support chat room at the site, and a weekly candle-lighting ceremony.

Pet sympathy cards can be found in drugstore aisles, and owners can find things like a \$125 paw-shaped gold pendant meant to hold a pet's ashes. Upscale Gramercy Park pet boutique Trixie & Peanut carries \$16 memorial pet candles for grieving dog or cat owners, as well as a \$175 mother-of-pearl urn.

Cremation is the most common and generally the cheapest option. Communal cremations are the least expensive, but many owners choose individual cremations, where they get back their pet's ashes. At Bide-A-Wee, individual cremations start at \$150, and at Hartsdale, they start at \$220 for a cat or small dog. Veterinary hospitals sometimes charge much more.

Some people are opting to memorialize their pets after death in a more corporeal way. About 30 people a year have their dead pets freeze-dried at Friends Forever in Fort Loudon, Pa., the business' owner, Mike McCullough said. The pet's internal organs are removed, and then its body is placed in a vacuum chamber, where the moisture is slowly sucked out.

The process takes several months to a year, or even more, depending on the size of the animal.

The cost, which is based on weight, runs from \$850 for a small pet the size of a Shih Tzu or a cat, to around \$4,000 for a golden retriever or a German shepherd.

Burial is a more common, but also pricey option. At the Hartsdale cemetery, burying a pet the size of a cocker spaniel starts at around \$1,200. Options include perpetual care for \$1,100 to \$1,200, and continuous twice-yearly flower plantings for \$1,500.

For Levy, who visits the cemetery at least twice a week, the expense has been worth it. "It gives me a sense of peace," she said. Levy plans to have her own ashes buried in the Hartsdale plots along with her pets.

"I've told my friends, and they laugh," Levy said. "But since these are my kids, it just makes sense to me."




Originally published on January 4, 2007

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